

### **Free Caregiver Training Class Starts July 10**

Ann Geiger wants to be prepared.

Albert Drexel wants to expand his tool box.

Both are finding what they need through the free Caregiver Training Series offered by Area 1 Agency on Aging.

“You will come out of there with a wealth of knowledge, feel much better about the situation at home, and much better about the person you are taking care of and yourself,” Drexel said.

“It was eye opening,” Geiger said of the 32-hour, four-series course that she began in May. Each of the four series consists of four two-hour classes, which are offered on consecutive Thursdays. A two- to three-week break separates each series. The full course is completed over about five months.

Adult Day Health of Mad River hosts the next full course, with Series 1 slated for 5:30 to 7:30 p.m. starting July 10.

A full course in Fortuna begins Jan. 8 from 6 to 8 p.m.

“The 5:30 p.m. start time is good because it doesn’t roll into the evening or last long enough that it really interferes with your day,” Geiger said. “Once a week, you get a burst of information, then time to absorb it before coming back.”

Geiger, 54, is the youngest of seven siblings spread 13 years apart. Her husband, 16 years her senior, has had heart issues most of their marriage.

“Both of his parents died of strokes, so we’re aware there may come a time when there is a need,” she said. “I’m the type of person who wants information, to see what is out there to help us beforehand.”

Geiger provided full-time care for her mother for six weeks in 2000 and then helped with a father who had emphysema.

“I felt overwhelmed and realized after doing it for a very short time that I was clueless,” she said. “People put off facing that Mom isn’t able to drive, or get to doctor appointments, or isn’t eating. We need to be able to step in. With this class, maybe people will get some insight into how to blend helping with the small things so that help with the larger ones is gradually accepted.”

Drexel is a 58-year-old caregiver with In-Home Support Services. He has 36 years of experience in the field, but the emotional drain of the job was taking its toll.

“The class helped me to realize that I am a human being and not just a workhorse,” he said.

“Sometimes, especially with a family member, you give and you give and you give, with very little back. I’ve learned to take time for myself.”

Drexel and Geiger have dealt with the guilt of not feeling up to the task as well as the obligation they feel to either a profession or a loved one.

“It can be overwhelming at times when you are getting yelled at and chastised for not doing this or that even while you are trying to reach out and help the person,” Drexel said. “It hurts.”

Geiger recalls trying to fatten up her cancer-ridden mother before hospice explained how nutrition was to be given.

“I was making beef stroganoff and cream sauce that her system couldn’t take,” she said. “She wasn’t going to say fix something else. Oh my God, what was I doing?”

Drexel appreciated the opportunity to meet other caregivers and hear their experiences.

“I wanted to compare them with my own, particularly with my case at home, which can be quite difficult,” he said

Both are more informed now as two of 32 people to take the series at some point in its initial year.

Area 1 Agency on Aging introduced the series to improve the quality of care and family caregiver competency while at the same time reducing the level of caregiver stress. The series includes hands-on activities, professional presentations, educational videos and discussion.

“The constant responsibility, the lack of knowledge regarding community resources and the lack of adequate training all contribute to frustration and stress among family caregivers, many of whom are often unprepared for what is being asked of them,” said Jeanie Ren, Manager of Information and Assistance and Caregiver Services at A1AA.

“Stress threatens the health of the caregiver and, when mixed with other family dynamics, can sometimes lead to unintended abuse or neglect of the person who needs the care.”

Attendance in one four-week session is not a prerequisite for future segments, but participants are encouraged to attend all four classes in any series they choose to attend.

“We like the group to get to know each other,” Ren said. “A big benefit of taking a class is finding out there are others out there who are doing what you are doing.”

Ren said caregiver support and stress management are a part of every series, but each series also has different focus areas.

Series 1 will cover family caregiver support and stress management; communication skills and community resources; basic safety issues; and special challenges in family and informal caregiving.

Space is limited and pre-registration required at 442-3763. Respite assistance is available to help participants attend the class.

“You can start anywhere in the series,” Geiger said. “I didn’t feel like I was missing anything and I started in May. I will definitely be at the next three.”

*Area 1 Agency on Aging paid Carol Harrison to write this article.*